THE QUESTIONING TIGER

Poetry Book Society Recommendation

James Reeves

The Questioning Tiger is James Reeves's first volume since the publication of his collected poems in 1960. Readers will find in these thirty-two poems those qualities which have characterised his earlier verse, so justly and memorably summed up by the late Edwin Muir when he wrote, 'Mr Reeves knows when to stop short; he makes us conscious of all that might have been and should not have been said . . . Proportion such as this is rare; Mr Reeves is probably the only poet who still possesses it. He is also a great inventor of situations, fanciful and true, serious and comic, and all presented with measure and truth . . . One is scarcely aware of the perfection of these poems until after one has read them, and then must read them again.' This latest volume shows, moreover, new developments. Exploring a vein of sharp, satiric comment, Mr Reeves rediscovers the immediate realities of love and guilt, art and admiration, corruption, mental division, and the problems of maintaining personal integrity against outer distractions.

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The Questioning Tiger

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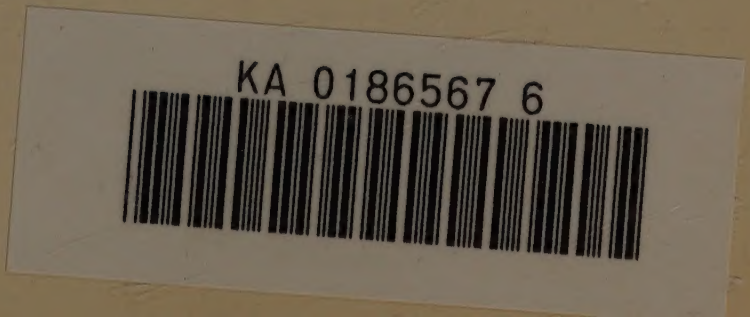

POETRY BY JAMES REEVES

The Natural Need
The Imprisoned Sea
The Password and other Poems
The Talking Skull
Collected Poems 1929-1959
The Questioning Tiger

POETRY FOR CHILDREN

The Wandering Moon
The Blackbird in the Lilac
Prefabulous Animiles
Ragged Robin

JAMES REEVES

The Questioning Tiger

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EVOLUTION OF A PAINTER

Beneath a pastoral sky, spotted by shadows,
Only by your young, talented eye regarded,
The two farm horses stood, unkempt and useful.
Your heart approved as your deft brush recorded.
One notes the skill; surprised, one notes the love,
And pensive, calm content the scene afforded.

For that was forty years ago, since when
The stoical farm beast has been abolished.
Not so your art, though now the patrons call
For something more expensive and embellished.
Proudly your valuable racers prance
Over the emerald turf, well combed and polished.

We need not twist our mouths with scorn to see
A pretty talent gone corrupt and hard.
Better than you have sold out for champagne.
Enough to know there is, where few regard,
The evidence of your compassion once,
In that ill-lit provincial gallery stored.

COMMAND YOUR DEVIL

Command your devil to lie down and dream.
When he is active, his lascivious eye
Maddens your mind for nothing but the touch
Of furtive hand on hand, thigh against thigh.
All that your wolfish greed contrives will be
A lonely festival of self-disgust,
A murderer's remorse without the blood
The meagre satisfaction of your lust.
So let your devil stalk with you no more
But stay at home and dream. The acts of vice,
The conquests he can fabricate for you
Will your imagination more entice
Than chance encounters quitted with revulsion.
The devil's fantasies use no compulsion.

IMPORTANT INSECTS

Important insects clamber to the top
Of stalks; look round with uninquiring eyes
And find the world incomprehensible;
Then totter back to earth and circumscribe
Irregular territories pointlessly.
Some insects narcisistically assume
Patterns of spots or stripes or burnished sheen
For purposes of sex or camouflage,
Some tweet or rasp, though most are without speech
Except a low, subliminal, mindless chatter.
Take heart: those scientists are wrong who find
Elements of the human in their systems,
Despite their busy, devious trafficking
Important insects simply do not matter.

DE FESCH

For you I search my reference books in vain,
Willem of the impossible name De Fesch.
Vienna was it, Venice, or Amsterdam
Whose plain citizens knew you in the flesh?

Midnight has fallen; the wind unpacified
Moves in the outer darkness while I think
Of that odd sound: not grand, like Palestrina,
Nor quaint, like Dittersdorf or Humperdinck.

Willem de Fesch would seem to be a sound
Not shaped predestinately for high fame;
Nevertheless to-night it pleases me
To celebrate your spirit with your name.

By way of certain pieces for two 'cellos
That spirit earlier breathed upon the air.
Even in an age renowned for melody
Your phrase was of a quality so rare
It spoke out of no time to any time
When a dry heart might wither from despair.

THE SERAPH

Call this your seraph which you seek to kill.
Hugging your inner darkness of despair
In doting arms, you trudge your winter way,
Murdering the snow for its offensive whiteness.
Your well-known shadow is discoursed upon
By anxious German intellectuals;
Less widely recognised, this seraph is
A sort of shadow-self composed of light.
This primal presence, which at home you knew
And trudges with you now through winter streets,
Reverberating in the silent snow,
Is not to be destroyed except one way—
The wilful overfeeding of your shadow.
At night most clearly, while your shadow starves,
Your seraph shines and grows and is your friend.

THE BLAMELESS ONE

He, the blameless one, exploring crime
Tried theft and gave the money to the poor;
Slandered and lied and cheated and confessed,
Ran disillusioned from the harlot's door.
Scribbled on walls and washed them clean again
By way of restitution to the city.
Committed arson, called the fire-brigade,
Solicited a cripple from sheer pity.
Finally in a rage of self-reproach
He met an enemy who had been his friend,
Sharpened his knife and followed out of doors,
Thinking 'At last—now I shall make an end.'
The blade struck. Ridiculously the head rolled off.
Appalled, he took the only possible course,
Opened his shirt and drove the knife in hard;
Then woke, shrieking with triumph and remorse.

A STOICAL ROBIN

'A stoical robin solid in the drift'—
I coined the line some seven years ago.
The poem was a failure, but those words
Return to memorise a famous snow.

In fact he wasn't dead. We took him in,
And put him down beside the fire to thaw.
He neither ate our crumbs nor drank our water
But, once revived, true to some primal law,

Took wing and vanished through the open window.
It seemed he'd not accept life as a gift
From those who live in houses, but would rather
Hazard for liberty the frozen drift.

Well, I might follow this excogitation
Into some parable of the human plight.
Instead I conjure from my inner view
A bird whose wings were never spread for flight,

A captive goldfinch chained against a wall.
Was it for pity, anger, or despair
Or simply with a painter's eye for colour
The Dutchman, Carl Fabritius, put him there?

The brilliant plumes are folded, the head firm:
Indifferent or contemptuous, the eyes brood.
A passionless fidelity to nature
Covers the painter's real attitude.

So I may take the chained bird, if I choose,
As emblematic of the mind of man;
And I salute the all-but-unknown artist,
Whether or not this was his conscious plan.

My robin's nothing, but your goldfinch lives,
Becomes an artefact by your success.
Yours lives in freedom, one might say, while mine
Remains imprisoned in my feebleness.

DISCHARGED FROM HOSPITAL

He stands upon the steps and fronts the morning.
The porter has called a taxi, and behind him
The infirmary doors have swung and come to rest.
Physician, surgeon, and anaesthetist
Have exercised their skill and he is cured.
The rabelaisian sister with the bedpan,
The vigorous masseuse, the sensual nurse
Who washes him modestly beneath a blanket,
The dawn chorus of cleaners, the almoner,
The visiting clergyman—all proceed without him.
He is alone beyond all need of them,
And the saved man goes home, to die of health.

DEMIGODS

We demigods can't be too careful, see.
Stricter proprieties hedge us. One slip-up
Can get us a bad name both in heaven and earth.
One of us lies or cheats and some god says
Well, he's half-human—what can you expect?
Another whores or drinks himself to death
And all men vilify his godly vices.
It's hard. But with the gods, how different!

All that they do enhances their prestige,
Or is officially overlooked; or else
Is twisted to adorn the personal legends
They've nothing else to do but manufacture.

Incest or sodomy, it's all the same,
A god must have some respite from his cares.
And erring humans claim divine protection;
But demigods have got to mind their step.

THE HALF-FULL GLASS

I told you I was drained of happiness.
The wine was only half way down our glasses.
You said to me, 'Are you not happy now?'
Searching my heart, I had to own I was.
How should I not be, drinking wine with You?

'Whatever dies was not mixed equally,'
Donne said. If so, love is without death,
For half the happiness of meeting you
Is pain at knowing we must separate;
And therefore love can never be complete.
A glass untasted, and an empty glass,
Are nothing but mere hope and memory.
The glass in which I drink your health contains
Now and always half wine, half emptiness.

RAINLESS

Roots in the darkened garden drink the rain
Where in the sun we walked some hours ago.
My need, no less than theirs, unguessed by you,
To take you in my arms and perpetrate
An undeclaring and forbidden love
Revives in me what was a habit once.
It is endurable—as is the thought
There is no problem where is no solution.
So, like a statue that no kiss evokes,
You to my inner eye made manifest,
Recall that sculptors turn their love to stone
Creating flesh beyond the reach of passion.
Then let the garden drink its fill; my roots
Need no one's pity, least of all my own.

GENERATION OF A CRITIC

The eager eye that went with you to school
Reported birds' eggs in the thicket;
The heart your mother and your father split
Was healed by girls and village cricket.

The euphuistic tongue and pen you practised
To gain no other recognition
Than that boon friend's you walked or drank beside.
Then Satan told you of ambition.

He whispered fame, wealth, power—and all that;
He promised honorary degrees;
He told you no one ever made a name
By cutting other names in trees.

So now the eager eye that went to school
With jealousy has gone a-squint;
The tongue is shrill, the ink turned poison,
Getting and keeping you in print.

NO TEARS FOR MISS MACASSAR

No tears for Miss Macassar, dispossessed
Three times by an inflexible landlord
Of that small tenement in which she housed
Her ominous, gaunt person and the hoard
Of keepsakes, water-colours, ferns and china.
She and her framed, clerical relations
Now to fresh scenes remove and to new neighbours.
She, stoical connoisseur of all privations,
Treasures her grievances like vintage wine.
So tears for Miss Macassar would be wrong:
She is no miser and too well she knows
Good wine is better shared than kept too long.

JAMES SON AND SPICER

We specialise in disordered consciences.
'You owe—we know' is our motto.
We assure you of close attention at all times.
Signed, for James Son and Spicer, Squiggle.
The seven-and-sixpence due to the landlady,
The good turn you might have done a friend,
The photographs you borrowed and retained,
We, James Son and Spicer,
Of everywhere in particular, know.
If you blame your own inadequacies on the hydrogen bomb,
Or sneak off in fantasy
To the Ruby Joy School of Ballroom Dancing
(Partners provided), we know.
If not, we find out. Nothing
Is overlooked, mislaid, or put into the wrong file.

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Women writers composing reminiscences,
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Men passing between coaches on moving trains,
Men with eccentric neckties,
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A KIND OF LOVE

You wait, it seems, upon the edge of sunlight
As if you said 'There'll be a shower perhaps'.
'Perhaps a storm,' I say, and had I power
As fear creeps down
Over the darkening pasture
To guarantee the sunshine, you should walk
Free there, and saved. But since I cannot change
Or even share the weather where you live,
Call weather-wisdom ineffectual
That does not tell itself: not of my world
The sunshine where assuredly you shall walk.
To learn impossibility from you
Is to be reconciled ungrudgingly
To yet another of the kinds of love,
The kind of love by which the loser wins.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

Fortunate to have not invested all
In that expensive house, we take another
Not so impressive, more our sort of place.
The other was impossibly fallen from grace.

We didn't have it on our hands for long.
We got a decent price without an agent.
The buyer had a limousine of gold
Which seemed to please the god of the household.

For never doubt there are some houses where
A resident spirit has his secret will
On all who live there long enough. At first
We didn't know our house was this way cursed.

TRADITIONAL

Strenuously downstream with muscles flexed,
See how he manages his sleek canoe.
All on the banks appraise
The style, the masterful technique, the resolute gaze.
'There is a man who will,' they say, 'arrive.'
Down the main stream, dead centre, see him strive.

We in our slothful punts keep to the shallows.
We hug the bank and watch the moorhens ride.
No trophy and no race
Seduce us from our talk and this unhurried pace.
May all such muscular candidates prefer
The main stream, leaving us the backwater.

POOR WOMAN

She backed him for a win
In the Immortality Stakes.
Here, she thought, is someone
Who amounts to something
(Or something which amounts
To someone—or something).
For fifty mortal years
She has endured his vanity,
Duplicity, boorishness, insensitivity—
And what is her reward?
Tired, harassed and grey,
As the mourners go, she says:
To hell with immortality. Thank God that's over.
Her own immortal lot she has endured daily
For fifty years, is now
Heartily sick of it.

BRUGES

And here, in the tiny city of the unloved,
Every third shop-window is a confectioner's,
In which daily on their walk from work
The mundane inhabitants eat heaven with their eyes.
That other heaven to which their faith consigns them
Is meanwhile populated only by sugar-angels
And the notes of bells
Breaking quarter-hourly from sky-high stone imprisonment
Like birds on scattered crumbs.
So lives the generation of the hungry
In a city piled with sweetmeats.

WHEREVER YOU GO

Wherever you go, you will hear the old people
Cursing my shadow,
Standing like a tall house with chimneys
Close to the sun;
You will hear them every one
Cursing my shadow
Wherever you go.

Wherever you go you will hear the young angels
Crying for Satan,
Greatest of them all,
Greater by his fall:
You will hear them all
Crying for Satan
Wherever you go.

ON A SINGER, WITH WINE

Drink well, and on this singer's eagle voice
Over the crested mountain heights you walk:
Forget I said those lips had been defiled
With talk of income tax and backstage talk.
Entranced by Château Lynch-Bages '53,
We get the problem into just proportion,
Evade the horror in the mental mirror,
View the world's outrages without distortion;
And so forget those lips have been defiled
By talk of income tax and backstage talk.
Drink well, and on this singer's eagle voice
Over the crested mountain heights you walk.

THE TIGER

They have sat in their wide window and approved
Irregularities of the autumn sky
Between the coasts of the sycamore and yew.
They have banished the questioning tiger from their land
Who might have resurrected the old fear
Springing like joy in the striped glades of childhood.
They have long known that the pursuing beasts
That strike at them on waking are themselves,
Have ceased to love the tiger for his hate.

A POEM FOR NEVER

In earshot of the one bird's February song
Not to not hope is all I can:
To hope for what, is more than could be said.
Not to believe, not to fear, not to regret
In the nearly no sun of February is easy.
Not to not hope is harder;
More than the one bird can teach
Is what to hope for.

PLANNING PERMISSION

He looked at me without surprise or pleasure
But with a bored, habitual compassion.
'They sent me here,' I said. 'I want to build.'
'Naturally,' he said. 'We'll see what we can do.'
Along the hopeless counter twenty others
Were seeing what they could do.
'You'll need these forms.'
Application for permission for an erection
For occupation as residential accommodation
And/or private domestic habitation.
'In triplicate of course. Return when filled
To the assistant sub-divisional officer.'
I took the papers. Tears of gratitude
Misted my sight; but he was gone already
Into the wastes beneath his sandy hair.

A year later I took the papers back.
Alone in his little room
The assistant sub-divisional officer sent for me.
He looked at me without surprise or pleasure
But with compassionate unrecognition.
'Permission for an erection. Quite so. We'll write.'
'Oh thank you, sir,' I started. 'Do you think . . . ?'
But under the sandy hair the eyes were blank.
After eleven months the answer came.
'Rejection of permission for an erection.
Any appeal to be directed within three years
To the sub-divisional officer for attention.'

Two years and more went by before I gained
The sub-divisional officer's section. With relief
I saw that he at least had had his due reward.
Between the flat ears under the greying hair
No sign of recognition stirred.
'Ah yes.
Objection to rejection of application for erection.'
With the old bored compassion in his voice,
'We'll do,' he promised, 'what we can to help.'
'Oh sir,' I sobbed. He interrupted me.

'I'll pass on your objection to the divisional officer.
It may take time.'
Re-charged with hope I went.

I died; and here I falter by the gate
Drained of desire and too ashamed to face
The sorrowing figure on the throne of grace.

IT WOULD BE WRONG

It would be wrong to say
The dead lack all regard.
I note, whichever way I turn,
Their strange solicitude.

To care as the dead care
Is to be coldly kind
And strictly fair.

If in dead statues' heads
The eyes are wholly blind,
Then why avoid their gaze
And shiver as you pass?

And if the books you stare at
Are uncompassionate,
Why try to not offend
Their letter and their spirit?

A noble building stands
Insentient, you would say,
And yet controls our thoughts
By stating order.

Let us care as the dead care,
Dispassionate;
See as they see, unmoved;
Speak as they speak,
Slowly, not for effect,
Without frivolity,
Truthfully,
Since none can answer us.

IMPROVISATIONS

1

PLASTIC

This popular wreath, the plastic model,
  Which only the vulgar-hearted crave,
Will last when every swollen noddle
  That wears it will be in the grave.
Yet who'd preserve a thing so cheap,
  So dearly bought at any cost?
Its place is on the rubbish heap:
  True fame is neither sought nor lost.

2

BE CERTAIN, MR A—Z

Be Certain, Mr A to Z,
  That when the vulture drops its dirt
Upon your undistinguished head
  It is not chance but your desert.

3

TO BE IS LOVE

To be, and not to think, is love:
So while I love you, love, I am,
Not less because I prize the light
More than the heat of this live flame.

Irrational love is like the bird
That serenades the setting sun
And sings upon the orchard top
Despite the farmer and his gun.

4

PRECEPT

Dwell in some decent corner of your being,
Where plates are orderly set and talk is quiet,
Not in its devious crooked corridors
Nor in its halls of riot.

5

THINGS TO COME

The shadow of a fat man in the moonlight
  Precedes me on the road down which I go;
And should I turn and run, he would pursue me:
  This is the man whom I must get to know.

THE SOLVERS

Invalids and other hotel residents
Unpuzzle themselves with patience-cards and jigsaws.
Crosswords engage saloon passengers at sea.
Philosophers invent puzzles with answers.
Each knows that what he is trying *can* be done.
Not all enjoy such comfort of assurance.
I, watching the backs of houses and of books,
Work away at my mind, fitting the pieces,
Pairing the cards, rejecting words.
So sitting, I become suddenly conscious
Of playing patience with crooked pieces,
While solving an incomplete jigsaw with words
In the precise non-language of a dream.
Some of the pieces fit, some of the cards match,
Only some of the pieces and the cards are lost.
I have tried to play it according to the rules,
Only the rules they sent are in Chinese.
Is it too late, I ask, to start again?
Or will extinction, when it comes, surprise me
Sorting the pieces, working out the clues?

CONVERTING THE VICARAGE

His was a comely residence, though crumbling.
  His ghost in a flurry of surplice has pattered away.
You the new owners will have much to look to
    Before you come to stay.

Re-point the brickwork and expel the damp;
  Renew the guttering; repair the stair;
Replace broken panes; strengthen the chimneys;
    But especially, and everywhere

In every corner you will have to reckon with
  A multifarious, sub-human population
Living in garret, gable, cupboard and corridor
    By gradual usurpation.

Mild-eyed, irascible, tyrannous or fussy,
  Conventional, stupid, active or plumb lazy,
They live deviously, act enviously,
    And can drive you crazy.

Proof against exorcism, they cannot be smoked out,
  Gassed out, thrown out by force or charm.
Better to give them *de facto* recognition—
    In fact they mean you no harm.

True, they will try to regulate your lives.
  If you reasonably protest, they won't heed you.
You will be made to feel you live by their leave.
    But consider: they need you.

They need your food and drink to batten on;
  They need your heat and your vitality;
And since they've nothing but their self-importance
    They need your pity.

So, though you may not rid your house of them,
  In course of time perhaps you'll make them see
That while they meanly live as parasites
    You are, in spirit, free.

INDIRECT SPEECH

Schoolmasters regularly fulminate
Against the horrors of official jargon;
And yet if these reformers had their way
I'm not so sure we'd get a better bargain.

Although admittedly periphrasis
Imparts an air of unreality,
Under the circumstances now obtaining
It might be better to let evil be.

To-day I had a buff, official notice
Couched in the smoothest, most obsequious terms;
But what it meant was: 'We can break you, Reeves;
You'd better pay up quick, you worm of worms!'

GOAT AND COMPASSES

By etymologies of public houses
Many are tempted to rash speculation.
This 'Goat and Compasses', where now we tend,
Must surely have a likelier derivation
Than 'God encompasseth us'—such irony
Could any mind unprejudiced admit?
Step to the bar and order what you will,
And in our private angle as we sit
These compasses can signify the force
That holds our thoughts within the civil order;
The goat obscenely leads them in a dance
Up to the outlaw country on the border.
The anarchic goat and rational compasses,
These are the warring standards that divide:
But here in conference in our private angle
Under this sign our thoughts are pacified.

GRAND OPERA

The lovers have poisoned themselves and died singing,
And the crushed peasant father howls in vain.
For his duplicity, lubricity and greed
The unspeakable base count is horribly slain.

After the music, after the applause,
The lights go up, the final curtain drops.
The clerks troop from the house, and some are thinking:
Why is life different when the singing stops?

All that hysteria and those histrionics,
All those coincidences were absurd.
But if there were no relevance to life,
Why were they moved to shudder and applaud?

Though they outlived that passion, it was theirs,
As was the jealousy, the sense of wrong
When some proud jack-in-office trampled them;
Only it did not goad them into song.

The accidents, the gross misunderstandings,
Paternal sorrow, amorous frustration
Have they not suffered? Was the melodrama
An altogether baseless imitation?

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Also available by James Reeves

Collected Poems

A Short History of English Poetry

The Critical Sense
A book designed to foster an appreciation of poetry and prose

The Everlasting Circle
One hundred and forty-two traditional songs and fragments

The Idiom of the People
An authoritative account of the folk-song in England, based on the unbowdlerized versions collected by Cecil Sharp

Teaching Poetry

Heinemann

Some books from the Heinemann Poetry Bookshelf, edited by James Reeves:

Selected Poems of Robert Browning

Selected Poems of John Clare

Selected Poems of S. T. Coleridge

Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson

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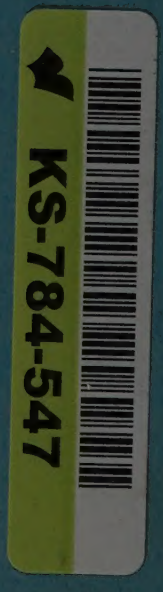
Selected Poems of D. H. Lawrence

The Modern Poet's World